



Hearing on “China and the Middle East”

April 19, 2024

Opening Statement of Commissioner Aaron Friedberg

Good morning, and welcome to the fourth hearing of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission’s 2024 Annual Report cycle. Thank you all for joining us today. Thank you to our witnesses for sharing your expertise and for the work you have put into your testimonies. I would also like to thank the Senate Finance Committee for allowing us to use their hearing room and the Senate Recording Studio for their assistance livestreaming this event. Finally, I would like to remind everyone attending here in person, and those listening online, that the testimonies from our witnesses are available on the USCC’s website. A transcript of this hearing will also be posted to the website.

The last time this Commission held a hearing on China and the Middle East was more than ten years ago in 2013. Since then, Chinese engagement with the region across all dimensions—economic, diplomatic, and even military—has grown considerably. This hearing is especially timely in light of recent events, including the ongoing Israel-Hamas war and Iran’s recent missile attacks on Israel. Our hearing today aims to take a long view, shedding light on China’s goals and strategic approach toward the Middle East and contributing to a better understanding of how its expanding role in the region may affect the interests of the United States.

Beijing’s growing engagement with countries in the Middle East is intended to advance its increasingly ambitious economic, military, and diplomatic objectives. China continues to rely heavily on imports of Middle Eastern energy, but it is also working hard to embed its companies in the region’s physical and digital infrastructure. China’s military, the People’s Liberation Army, is deepening its involvement in the region through a combination of arms sales, exercises, counter-piracy task force deployments, and, potentially, future military bases. Beijing also seeks to raise its diplomatic profile with Middle Eastern countries and to gain their support for an alternative vision of world order which puts itself—not Washington—at the center. It has invested heavily in its bilateral relationships and has even sought to present itself as a potential mediator of regional disputes, a part it claimed to have played in brokering the reported Saudi-Iran rapprochement in March 2023. Yet the limits of China’s willingness to assume a constructive role in the combustible politics of the region have become clear in the wake of the deadly terrorist attack on Israel last October, Iran’s missile offensive against Israel earlier this month, and continued Houthi attacks on commercial shipping. Beijing has failed to forthrightly condemn any of these events, instead placing the lion’s share of the blame for regional instability on Israel and the United States.

In short, China’s role in the Middle East presents complex and mounting challenges to the United States. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on these issues, and on actionable steps Congress can take to mitigate these challenges. I will now turn the floor over to my colleague and co-chair for this hearing, Commissioner Jon Stivers.